

THE B. B. G.

H. Belloc

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the New Statesman

Miscellany

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THE DRC

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THE B.B.G.

MEN are so familiar with the "Blind Beggars' Guild" and its sober but really beautiful uniform in our streets to-day that they take both for granted and hardly ask themselves how the great organisation arose.

I have indeed heard children ask how it was that a lusty, bright-eyed young man striding down the street should be connected with such a name as the "Blind Beggars' Guild; but for all of us grown-ups the thing has become a matter of course like the Salvation Army. We never stop to think of the odd incongruity of the name.

Yet the story is fascinating. It is what I have heard Lord Atchamhurst call "a romance of modern organisation," and again, Professor Boodle has called it in his work on *The Anglo-Saxon Spirit* (Beacon and Co. 17s. 6d.) "a typical, perhaps the most typical, development of an Anglo-Saxon institution from a purely private to a semi-public function."

Before telling the story in the briefest fashion, I must assure my readers that the proof of this article has been submitted to Draga, Lord Pallington, for it would be an offence to the memory of one of our greatest public men if anything should appear of which he would have disapproved.

It was during the great distress following upon the first great European war, that the late Lord Pallington (then plain Mr. Powke) found himself compelled, after a very disastrous speculation, to turn to some new field of industry. Having genius, his vision was intense rather than precise: he had no exact plan in his head. He was directed by a trifling accident towards what was to be the success of his life—and a thing to him of unspeakably greater advantage—the foundation of a most beneficent national institution. He was turning over in his pocket some loose change (the jingling of which reminded him ironically that his total available capital was now reduced to £800), when he saw, at the corner of Paradise Gardens, a blind beggar, standing complete with eye-shield, tin mug, little dog and stick, and even the traditional placard hung by a string from his shoulders.

In one moment—how genius leaps where industry must crawl!—he had a plan in his mind.

Mr. Powke first looked very carefully over the standing figure, the dog, the stick, the eye-shield, the tin mug and the placard; then without any hesitation he made his first investment in his new enterprise. He dropped one penny and a halfpenny into the tin mug.

His object in sacrificing the second coin was to call the Blind Beggar's particular attention by the double ring and also to notice whether the dropping of more than one coin appeared to the said B. B. a normal, or an abnormal, event. The thanks he received were purely conventional; that gave him his first hint. He passed on, turned the corner, so that he might not be observed by those who might have noticed his act of charity (let alone by the Blind Beggar himself), cast about among the houses facing the blind beggar's pitch until he found one which had a window to let, almost exactly opposite the recipient of his recent bounty. He drew a chair up in front of the window, and watched the Blind Beggar through a pair of strong binoculars, hour after hour.

What command of detail have our modern captains of industry! The future Lord Pallington sat like this without food or drink through all that noon and all the afternoon, noting with a pencil stroke each passer-by and putting a rapid cross against those foolish enough to drop coins into the little tin mug.

The light dwindled. The April night came on. The

blind beggar did not budge, nor did Mr. Powke. It was, as is so often the case in the great undertakings of modern commerce, a trial of endurance. It was nearly nine o'clock before some necessity for food shifted the mendicant from his post and he began to shuffle slowly westward through the now deserted street, tapping with his stick and nervously clutching at the string whereby his little dog led him along.

The moment the quarry moved, the hound was afoot. Long before the B. B. had reached the end of the short street, Mr. Powke was walking at a leisurely pace about fifty yards behind him. After perhaps half a mile of this slow progress they came to an open space, with railings standing on a broad stone base. The beggar made as though to sit down and Mr. Powke immediately darted into the refuge of a portico from which he could see without being seen.

He saw the B. B. sit down with a gesture of great relief upon the broad stone shelf, warily lift his eye-shield, glance beneath it furtively to right and left and then, there being no one in sight, remove it, as also the placard; both of which he thrust into the pocket of his shabby green coat. After that, he turned out from the pocket on the opposite side the coins accumulated and began counting them under the electric light above him. Mr. Powke noted that he divided them by shillings and he carefully counted each shilling that was dropped back again. Now and then a piece of silver would appear and was set aside, then the whole was put back into the pocket and Mr. Powke accounted for a little over £1 4s. All this done, the B. B. rose and went his way at a brisk pace towards some home of his, still further westward.

Two days were allowed to pass; upon the third, Mr. Powke approached the blind beggar and drew him into conversation. He learnt from him the conditions under which the police allowed him the monopoly of this pitch and one or two other details which, true or false, the man was willing to advance.

The next step was the hire of an assistant. For this purpose Mr. Powke laid his hand upon a man with whose past he was familiar, purchased a binocular for him, set him to watch at the window and himself went out to seek other pastures.

He deliberately took a very different quarter of London, near St. Pancras Station, found another Blind Beggar, took up a post of observation, hired for a small tip from the foreman of a stables, and repeated the whole process. He set another watcher there next day, and he did it all over again a third time in Southwark, a fourth in Bethnal Green, a fifth in Hammersmith.

By this time he had accumulated a fairly representative chart of hours, receipts, proportion of donors to passers-by, etc., and he was ready to go forward. He drew up a report upon each of the original five, mapped out another five in other parts of the town, planting his watchers as usual and rapidly extending his operations.

Before the end of the year he had one hundred Blind Beggars upon his list, of whom twenty-seven were not really blind at all, of whom all but eight were at work before ten in the morning and all but seventeen were on duty till at least eight o'clock at night; only three, he found, made a break in the middle of the day for food, etc., etc. He had a full statistic for his next great advance.

This was to go from one B. B. to the other (acting each time under a different name), and profess friendship and aid, with that sympathy which is so necessary when we approach the poor for their own good.

He began by charitably proposing to each of these one hundred men that he should guarantee them a certain daily receipt, larger than that which they had confessed to obtaining by their own efforts, for he professed to be shocked to hear how little they managed to collect. I very much regret to say that they had all grossly understated their incomes, but those who have undertaken the

hard work of uplift will not be surprised at the shocking disregard for truth in that class of society. Meanwhile, he was extending his operations and adding to his tables a second, a third and a fourth hundred, but as his capital was now drawing to an end, he did not extend it beyond a fifth hundred, which indeed covered the greater part of the Metropolis. Furnished with a complete knowledge, not only of averages, but of detailed receipts, Mr. Powke next undertook the really delicate operation known in higher financial circles as "the Double Cross." He satisfied the police. This done, he played the master stroke and gathered in the whole.

Each B. B. was individually informed that his malfeasance was now known, those who were not really blind were given indisputable proof that their cheat was in the hands of a powerful agent, each statement of receipt was compared with the real average income, in many cases restitution was demanded and was of course unobtainable. These wicked men who had imagined themselves to be fleecing gullible charity sought each his particular policeman, but in vain. The police turned a deaf ear to such appeals and threatened that the B. B.'s should lose their pitches if they showed any incompatibility of temper.

After this action, Mr. Powke had all the Blind Beggars of London, real and apparent, in his hand, and was already known among his intimates at the Babylon Bar as "The Blind Beggar King." His original capital had been by this time replenished by his rightful demands from the miserable beings who had attempted to deceive him, but to whom he deigned to return good for evil. Five hundred Blind Beggars at an average of 10s. each a week gave him an ample income with which to proceed. He provided for articles to appear in the press, denouncing the growth of mendicancy since the war and urging the necessity for its organisation. He gave the blind beggars pamphlets for distribution, assuring the charitable that accounts were now audited and that a Guild had been formed for protecting their interests, so that no donation could be wasted upon an unworthy object. As his income grew, he obtained the services of Sir Archibald Glass, R.A., to design a sober but striking uniform with the letters "B. B. G." modestly inscribed in blue upon the lapels of the coat.

Thus gradually, and by careful, modest, unobtrusive steps, was the great affair built up. Londoners grew familiar with the uniform which guaranteed the control of those who received and the proper auditing of donations. Indeed, the auditing was conducted by Mr. Powke's own nephew, the name of whose firm stood second to none for integrity. A few abandoned creatures who attempted to imitate the uniform and beg on their own were dealt with severely by the magistrates, who rightly pointed out the special wickedness of such an offence in view of the institution now existing for the public good.

Sir Henry Powke (as he now became in the first Birthday Honours List following upon the second Great War) had long gathered into his magnificent organisation other forms of mendicancy, and I am glad to say many of the smaller trades as well, which, if they cannot properly be called mendicant, are at least precarious, such as the retail sale of matchboxes, laces, penny toys and flowers, together with boot-blackening and the dissemination of the organs of influence owned by the greatest and most powerful of our great nobles. The whole of this superb advance covered less than fifteen years. As is always the case with success, the last efforts of the enterprise were the greatest, and we have remarked within the last twenty-four months the great new Central Offices in Holborn and the District Offices in the various parts of London which have sprung up, with their characteristic Grecian architecture, almost before our eyes. To-day, apart from the Grand Master, the Wardens, the District Inspectors, the Local Inspectors, Checkers, Accountants and the rest, no

less than 7,582 members of the Blind Beggars' Guild now stand upon the rolls, and there has recently been added, standing between the magnificent Enquiry wing of the Central Office and the Employers' Lounge, a department which occupies itself with all the legitimate branches of banking, including, as a special feature, operations in the foreign exchanges.

Lord Pallington did not live long to enjoy the honour which was conferred upon him on the conclusion of his great life work. He died from a very painful form of Cæcopenuria of the Aesthetic Processes, at the comparatively early age of 69 and eleven months. It may be truly said of him more than of any other of his kind in our generation, that if we would seek a monument, we have but to look around. All the old squalor of beggary in London has disappeared. Everywhere the bright uniform of the B. B. G. has replaced it, and in the whole of that great society, or family as the founder preferred to call it, there is not one whose name, antecedents, actions, character, thumb marks, permanent scars, etc., are not in the hands of the public authorities. Best of all, the deaths from starvation have been reduced from 8.887 per cent. to 8.256, and the illegitimate births from 8.982 to 7.615. Decimals to three places.

H. BELLOC.

THE ANCRE AT HAMEL

WHERE tongues were loud and hearts
were light

I heard the Ancre flow ;

Waking oft at the mid of night

I heard the Ancre flow.

I heard it crying, that sad rill,

Below the painful ridge,

Past the burnt unraftered mill

And the relic of a bridge.

And could this sighing water seem

To call me far away,

And its pale word dismiss as dream

The voices of to-day ?

The voices in the bright room chilled

And that mourned on alone,

The silence of the midnight filled

With that brook's troubling tone.

The struggling Ancre had no part

In these new hours of mine,

And yet its stream ran through my heart,

I heard it grieve and pine,

As if its rainy tortured blood

Had swirled into my own

When by its battered bank I stood

And shared its wounded moan.

EDMUND BLUNDEN.

Music

MADNESS

NOT midsummer madness, of course; that is hardly a disability that Mr. Nigel Playfair is likely to suffer from! So far-looking, wary and experienced a theatrical purveyor is much more likely to be afflicted with winter wisdom, but here at last we have on record the fact that Mr. Nigel Playfair for once broke through his congenital distrust of contemporary work and staged a comedy with music by two young living authors. This in itself is a great

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